Linking mountain identities throughout the world: the experience of Swiss communities

Debarbieux, Bernard; Rudaz, Gilles

Linking mountain identities throughout the world: the experience of Swiss communities

Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz

Department of Geography, University of Geneva
Environmental Policy and Planning Group, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This article analyses transnational partnerships set up between Swiss mountain municipalities and other mountain communities throughout the world. It seeks to evaluate the role of this kind of horizontal cooperation in a world which is increasingly dominated by global flux and complex interactions between multi-level stakeholders. A review of these partnerships shows the quantitative importance of partnerships built upon the celebration of attributes and values associated with mountains. Beyond the very great diversity in the types of partnership and their objectives, the partnerships are surprisingly capable of combining cultural, political and economic objectives, and of bringing together local objectives, national imagination, federal policies and intergovernmental priorities.

Keywords: identity • mountains • partnerships • Switzerland • transnationalism

In downtown Zermatt, in the Swiss Alps, a bronze relief tablet can be found right beside the St. Mauritius Church (Figure 1). On the tablet are carved the stylized shapes of the Matterhorn (4478 meters) and of the Myoko volcano (2454 meters), located at the center of the main Japanese island, Honshu. The tablet celebrates the twinning of the related communities, Zermatt and Myokokogen, on 24 May 1997. Initiated by a Japanese mountaineer, Tsuyoshi Ueki, who first visited Zermatt in 1968, the cooperation was sealed between both tourist offices. However, over time, this cooperation became an official twinning of the two communities. Since then, Swiss and Japanese citizens from these communities have met four times.

On 8 November 2001, during the opening of the most important tourist fair in China, the China International Travel Mart, held that year in Kunming International Trade Center, Yunnan, the twinning of the Matterhorn and Yulong Snow Mountain (5596 meters) was officially set up. This partnership had been initiated by Switzerland Tourism, the official organization for the promotion of tourism in Switzerland, only a few months after the opening of the office of the National Tourism Administration of China in Zürich, and of the Swiss National Tourism Office in Beijing. The twinning of these two very famous peaks had been proposed by Wenjia Zhang, representative of Switzerland Tourism in Beijing, and endorsed by the Valais canton, the Yunnan

 10.1177/1474474008094619

FIGURE 1 Commemorative monument of the twinning of Zermatt and Myokokogen, Zermatt. (Photo by Gilles Rudaz.)

province and local communities. Since then, this initiative has been mentioned on the website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a significant example of cooperation between China and Switzerland.

There are few peaks in the world as famous as the Matterhorn. It has been revered by mountaineers since the mid-19th century. It has been associated with the public image of Switzerland by hundreds of commercial brands, tourist guides and popular books. It became a national icon at the end of the 19th century. However, during the last 15 years, its image has been associated with other mountains' images, in Japan, China, and elsewhere throughout the world. What does this mean? If the Matterhorn–Yulong Mountain twinning has been initiated by national institutions, the economic added value of such a partnership seems much more important than the political meaning of their national emblems. If the Zermatt–Myokokogen twinning has been initiated for economic and professional reasons, Switzerland as a Nation-State is not behind, and local people have turned this partnership into a cordial cultural exchange. Should we conclude from this that national icons are losing their influence? Should we conclude as well that places and images which have been promoted as national icons can carry additional or alternative meanings which express other types of territorialities, local as well as global and transnational? This article will discuss these questions with the help of an exhaustive survey of the partnerships developed by Swiss mountain communities throughout the world.

National identities and the rise of alternative modes of collective identification

The shaping of modern western societies through the process of Nation-State-building is well-documented nowadays. Along with various institutional, economic and social modes of structuring,[1] national identities have been promoted in order to cultivate a collective sense of belonging[2] thanks to various social processes and public institutions such as schools and official media. Many scientists have proved that places and landscapes, like Switzerland's Matterhorn, are endowed with that power of fuelling the national imagination.[3] Together with maps and narratives (the story-telling tradition and heritage for example), emblematic places and landscapes were able to shape the territorial imagination of modern Nation-States. Although there were groups of people that were not involved in this process (i.e. Jews or Roms in many countries), and although others were willing to promote alternative forms and scales of self-definition (i.e. ideologists of internationalism within the socialist movement), most personal identities and individual territorialities were affected by it.

During recent decades, many authors have made various but somehow complementary diagnoses about the weakening of national identities and of the capacity of Nation-States to regulate the collective sense of belonging. Some of them focused on transnational circulation and the identities fostered by the increasing flow of migrants and information.[4] Others were more interested in new forms of local and regional identities related to social and political movements,[5] and in the growing importance given to the natural environment (as in bioregionalism) and cultural heritage.[6] Some even stated that some sense of global identity may develop thanks to the rise of ecological consciousness and human solidarity.[7] However diverse the rising modes of collective identity-building observed by these social scientists, they usually agree on the fact that the ability of Nation-States to impose identities of reference, sometimes qualified as 'legitimizing'[8] and sometimes as 'institutional',[9] was dramatically weakened because of the competition created by alternative collective identities, such as 'identities of resistance' or 'project identities'.[10] They also suggest that the interlinked territorial constructions – combining material and symbolic features – that have been inherited from the efforts of Nation-States are made fragile by the current conditions of modernity.

These approaches are useful for understanding many aspects of the increasing complexity of collective identification within contemporary societies. However, the question of whether transnationalism necessarily weakens Nation-States has been discussed.[11] As a matter of fact, it has been proved that many transnational initiatives, such as networks of nationals located abroad,[12] reinforce national identities. Therefore, it is worth looking for specific practices which could illustrate a major alternative: the mobilization of symbolic resources and new forms of collective identities which could foster national and transnational identities at the same time.

Policies implemented by local communities to promote cooperation with foreign partners deserve to be looked at from this point of view. However, very few researchers have analyzed such partnerships. One of the few geographers to have taken an interest in the subject is Wilbur Zelinsky, who has studied the specific case of twinnings, which he sees as an ideal way of examining the 'transnationalization of society and culture'.[13] Nevertheless, we know some of these initiatives fairly well: twinnings developed between European municipalities, between northern and southern communities, and between big cities; decentralized cooperation undertaken by

municipalities; associations of communities, etc. These partnerships have become more and more numerous and diverse[14] since World War II, on an ever-widening scale. Most of them have been dedicated to peace-building, improving mutual understanding among peoples and, sometimes, fostering solidarity. However, we know very little about the role of the sense of belonging in these partnerships.

Combining collective identities, modes and scales of identification

This article focuses on these very topics: the sense of belonging and partnerships. It aims to analyze how local identities in Switzerland are being forged with symbolic resources shared with other people located elsewhere, these resources being accessible thanks to the growing mobility of people and information. It questions the way these initiatives compete with or reinforce more traditional and institutional identities (cantonal and national).

This article especially focuses on partnerships between 'mountain communities' when at least one of them is located in Switzerland. The reason for this choice is threefold: (1) methodological, (2) theoretical, and (3) empirical.

1. It seemed reasonable to ground the arguments put forward in this article in a specific kind of partnership. In fact, taking into account the wide diversity of partnerships created by local communities, it would be possible to make a selection based on one of the following criteria: the mode of partnership (i.e. twinnings or decentralized cooperation), the dominant motive (i.e. transfer of experiences or intercultural exchanges) or the type of symbolic feature involved in the process. For the purposes of this article, the third criterion was selected, as it was especially useful for examining the role of geographical resources within partnerships. Therefore, mountain images, as one of these resources, became a logical subject of study.
2. 'Mountain' is a very generic concept. It may not be meaningful for communities located in a mountain region when they think about themselves. Self-definition may focus instead on other symbolic material: religion or language, for example. Such communities may also have an exclusively local means of self-definition based on geographical references: a specific valley or an emblematic peak, for example. But for some, being in a mountain area is meaningful in itself, suggesting then that other communities located in other mountain areas share something with them: the environmental characteristics, cultural practices, meanings, etc. Therefore, a shared reference to mountains highlights the role of geographical categories (mountains as well as cities and other categories) used for building world views in the process of identification. Just as individuals have to combine, within their personal identity, both a sense of singular individuality and a sense of belonging to various groups of people who have something in common, communities, within a self-definition process, refer both to specific elements (local history, place, heritage, local heroes, etc.) and to shared ones, the latter allowing them to belong to larger groups of people. Nations and regions were the major shared references of local communities when the Nation-State was prevalent. Nowadays, with the growing circulation of people, information and models, and the

increase in transnational flows, alternative references are possible. The case of mountains is interesting for two main reasons: the concept is a global one, and is used to designate contrasted landforms on every continent, so it can easily be used to indicate a specificity which is common to different geographical contexts. The concept also refers to a category of natural objects, and therefore referring to it in the process of self-definition is not necessarily rooted in historical features and can involve very different people.

3. It is only recently that communities have come to use the idea of 'mountain' as a means of self-identification.[15] Although many people living in the mountains have been seen and specified from the outside for centuries, such a qualification has only been used for self-designation since the 19th century, for two main reasons: the rise of mountain tourism and the necessity of dealing with the tourist's imagination; the rise of public policies aimed at promoting a more rational use of natural resources and the need for local people to position themselves in this context of public controversies and debate. During the last decades, this process of self-designation with symbolic images adopted by others reached a new level: in 1992, thanks to several international organizations (IGOs), States and scientists, mountains were given the status of priority milieu for implementing sustainable development policies during the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED).[16] Ten years later, the promotion of mountains on the international stage culminated with the United Nations' proclamation of 2002 as the 'International Year of Mountains' and the setting up of an International Partnership for Mountain Regions (later called the Mountain Partnership) at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002). The Mountain Partnership brought together States, IGOs and environmental associations. The question of the involvement of the inhabitants of mountain regions in such initiatives was raised from the mid 1990's. Many local initiatives were taken by IGOs and national agencies to illustrate the added value of these policies for local people. But at the same time, some people were willing to allow inhabitants or their representatives to participate as such in the whole process. For this reason, the World Association of Mountain People was created in 2001 and obtained a seat in the Mountain Partnership. Therefore, becoming a 'mountain people' and being identified as such became an issue for some leaders eager to become actors in the globalization of mountain issues. Within a few decades, mountains have thus clearly become a social issue in the self-definition of the populations in question, and a political issue in their recognition within the process of the globalization of mountain policies.

For these theoretical, methodological and empirical reasons, this article will focus on mountain communities in Switzerland and the way they develop regional or global partnerships with mountain communities located abroad. It will examine how the collective identities of Swiss communities who refer to mountains as a major symbolic component participate in a multi-scalar system of identifications and in chosen transnational networks, thanks to the variety of complementary meanings associated with mountains. In this article, identity is defined, following David Snow, as 'a shared sense of "one-ness" or "we-ness" anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of "others"'.[17] The concept will be used in a very pragmatic manner: What do these identities help to do? What kind of collective projects

do they help to promote? Taking into account such a constructivist and pragmatic approach, this article will underline how a specific kind of symbolic material – mountains – can be used for political projects whose spatiality is very different, some of them being driven by local motives, others by regional or national ones, still others by the desire to act at a global level. We will also set out to pinpoint both why and how local communities instrumentalize images of mountains in order to combine the inscription of local populations in both vertical – from the municipality to the State – and horizontal frameworks, through transnational networking. The main question of this paper becomes: To what extent do these mountain identities bolster or challenge legitimatizing identities and the territorial framework in which they have arisen?

National identities and public policies in Switzerland

Switzerland has been associated with the image of mountains for centuries, mainly thanks to scientists, tourists and philosophers of the 18th century.[18] Then the 'mountain people' ethnotype became very common as a tool for illustrating a very deterministic way of thinking the nature-societies relationship. Later, Swiss national historiography began to emphasize the importance of Alpine populations and environments in the narrative of the nation and the State.[19] Mountain people were presented in a very positive way as the depository of the traditions and political values of the nation. Thus it is not surprising that 'mountain people' as a self-designation occurred early in Switzerland, during the mid-19th century. Later, following the Second World War, associations of 'mountain peoples' were set up to pursue public policies specific to mountain regions, especially regional and agricultural policies, and to ensure that they were applied. Therefore, mountain people have benefited from being identified as such for a long time.

During the last 20 years, Switzerland played a key role in the process of the globalization of mountain issues. Setting aside a very radical conception of neutrality, Switzerland joined several international organizations and the Federal State had to identify priorities in its diplomacy. Taking into account the image of the country abroad, mountains appeared appropriate, along with other issues such as peace-building. Therefore, Switzerland was very active, before, during and after UNCED, in getting a specific mention of mountains included in Agenda 21. Many Swiss institutions and stakeholders were highly involved in the process. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) was a major actor in the preparation of UNCED. It was especially willing to optimize, at the global level, national know-how related to mountain regions and environments: 'Switzerland is known as a mountain country par excellence. More than 75% of its land area is mountainous […] Consequently, the country has a long history of experience and tradition related to sustainable development in mountain [sic]'.[20] Advised by the SDC, the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs built formal partnerships with mountain countries of the South (Bolivia, Nepal, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, etc.) within UNCED as well as within the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Last but not least, in 2008, Switzerland is still the major funding partner for the Mountain Partnership.

At the same time, Swiss scientists have worked hard to promote their academic know-how in environmental research in mountain regions. They have played a key-role in creating international scientific conferences and institutions. They have also established many applied research

programs in developing countries (especially in the Andes, Africa and Central Asia) with the help of the SDC and the Swiss National Science Foundation. Therefore, it appears that decades after having become a major national emblem and source of collective identity, mountains were used as a major reference for positioning Switzerland in the global concert of nations.

Identifying partnerships set up by Switzerland's mountain municipalities

This context has to be kept in mind when analyzing the partnerships built by Swiss communities with people located in mountain regions abroad. The research methodology for this article combined a systematic survey of partnerships with interviews in order to fine-tune information collected during the research period.

A first survey was sent in 2005 to 1453 Swiss municipalities located in a mountain zone.[21] 413 municipalities were engaged in partnerships with a total of 578 initiatives – this data is based on the 1132 replies received (78% of the municipalities contacted) and the few databases there are on the subject.[22] Almost half of these partnership initiatives (277), involving 231 municipalities, brought together communities located in mountain regions in and outside Switzerland.[23] This gives us an initial idea of Swiss municipalities' readiness to orientate their distance partnerships towards other mountain municipalities.

A second survey with these 231 municipalities was done and produced information about each of the partnerships, including their origin and motivation. For 170 of the 277 initiatives, the 'mountain' characteristic of the municipalities (151) was explicitly referred to. Semi-directive interviews with a representative sample of the people involved in the partnerships were conducted (53). In addition, there were interviews with partners abroad, mainly in the US, and visits to assemblies of project leaders.

Thanks to these data, it is possible to classify the partnerships according to two sets of criteria: first, their nature and motivations; second, the modalities under which mountain images and identities are mobilized.

Why forge links between 'mountain peoples'?

Within the group of 170 partnerships explicitly referring to the 'mountain character' of the partners, a typology has been built on three criteria: (1) the number of partners involved and the size of the operation, (2) whether or not the operation is run or coordinated at the national or supra-national level, and (3) the objectives of these initiatives. Each of the four types will be presented with one or more examples illustrating the kinds of initiatives under consideration.

Type 1: the politically motivated integrating network

The first type corresponds to communities willing to build integrating networks. They combine two objectives: to facilitate an exchange between a large number of partners, and to acquire a legitimate status in discussions with other players about managing mountain regions.

At the very beginning of this century, the Alliance in the Alps association was the only one of this first type;[24] in 2005, there were about 190 municipalities involved, 95 of which were in Switzerland. The Alliance was set up in the wake of the Alpine Convention, an international treaty signed by the Alpine States then willing to coordinate their policies in favor of the protection and development of the Alps.[25] It aims to pursue the implementation of sustainable development policies at the municipal level, in particular through exchanges of information and experiences. As it is run by elected members who are also activists, it also aims to influence Alpine States and the EU so that they strengthen their cooperation and take concrete steps to implement the objective of sustainable development in the Alps. To this end, the Association has been structured in national sections whose aim is to strengthen their position as key players in any institutional meeting dealing with the Alps.

Type 2: the apprenticeship of local democracy and East–West partnerships

The second type of initiative is made up of those who have forged partnerships at the behest of higher bodies, but without attempting to use the partnerships as a political lever at the regional level. In this case there are only East–West cooperation projects.

The fall of the communist regimes from 1989 onwards led to twinnings between municipalities in Western Europe, which were anxious to spread democracy, and those of Eastern Europe, which wished to open up towards the West. Several large-scale initiatives in Switzerland, in particular with Romania and the Czech Republic, involve a large number of municipalities.

Two examples – cooperation programs set up with Bulgaria on the one hand and with the former Yugoslavia on the other hand – illustrate the whys and hows of these partnerships. Inter-Assist took the initiative for Bulgarian municipalities. The association was set up in 1990 by Swiss experts who sought to contribute to development aid in mountain regions. The first initiatives were essentially humanitarian ones and aimed to further cooperation between Swiss and Bulgarian hospitals. But a second objective – institution-building – rapidly came to the forefront when Swiss mountain municipalities were invited to help Bulgarian municipalities in Stara Planina to reform their administration and modes of local government. During the same period, a whole series of operations was led by *Causes Communes Suisse* in the fast-disintegrating Yugoslavia. This latter association was founded in 1992 and first dealt with emergency aid. It then turned to strengthening democratic structures and helping in local development projects. Thus 14 partnerships between Swiss municipalities and municipalities in the former Yugoslavia were set up, like the partnership between La Chaux-de-Fonds (Jura neuchâtelois) and Plav (Montenegro).

Type 3: the economic club orientation

The third type of partnership is specific to tourist-oriented municipalities, resorts and sites. The main aim is economic gain and the organization is of the 'club' type. The few municipalities involved, which keep a close watch over their prerogatives, try to build up the image of a privileged area with quality services. This club orientation sets out to introduce the idea of distinction, thus leaving out some resorts and sites which symbolically lose status. This

type is the opposite of the integrating network approach illustrated by Alliance in the Alps, which seeks to bring in as many partners as possible.

Thus Davos (Grisons) is twinned with three municipalities: Aspen in the United States (1987), Chamonix in France (1990) and Sanada in Japan (1976). The partnerships were set up on a one-off basis without a global policy on the initiative of the Tourist Office and then taken over by the municipality in 2000. The stated aim in each case is to favor the sharing of experiences between four ski resorts of comparable size, fame and standing:

> Aspen and Davos share [sic] much in common including: Both are world-renowned winter and summer resorts with spectacular mountain settings; both have flourishing cultural programs, and host events of international importance; both take pride in excellent sporting venues and facilities, and their citizens excel in sports; both are committed to providing a nurturing, stimulating, and healthy environment for youth; and both are dedicated to the preservation of a sustainable environment.[26]

Comparable partnerships with regard to type and motivation have been set up between Saas Fee (Valais) and Steamboat Springs (USA) (Figure 2), Grindelwald (Bern) and Azumi-Mura (Japan), and Zermatt (Valais) and Sexten (Italy), as well as Myokokogen (Japan) and Yulong Snow Mountain (China) as indicated at the very beginning of this article (Figure 1). Likewise, a tourist-oriented twinning has been set up between the Jungfrau (Bern) and the Huangshan Mountain (China), more precisely between local leaders in charge of the respective World Heritage Sites (Figure 3).

A similar approach, albeit on a different scale and with even more precise modalities, has brought together 11 major resorts in the Alps in the association Best of the Alps (Figure 4). This is a joint promotion initiative set up by the director of Zermatt's Tourist Office at the end of the 1980s with the aim of coordinating the efforts that Alpine resorts channel towards distant markets. Currently, there are 12 members in France, Italy, Austria, Germany and Switzerland (Davos, Grindelwald, Saint Moritz and Zermatt). Strict conditions have to be met in order to join (the candidate has to be famous internationally, to have a long tradition of hospitality, quality infrastructures, high-quality summer tourist activities), and the price is high (300,000 euros in 2005), thus limiting the number of resorts able to join the 'club'.

Type 4: one-off initiatives

The fourth type of partnership corresponds to initiatives taken by local players and proceeds independently of a national agenda or other framework that has been laid down at a higher level (as is the case in types 1 and 2). It is more motivated by the desire to instigate cultural and humanitarian exchanges between two partners than by economic profit (as opposed to type 3), and does not have the network or club orientation of types 1 and 3. In addition, of the four types it is the one that most explicitly aims to involve as widely as possible the people living in the particular Swiss municipality.

These initiatives all have cultural aspirations. Every other year in Sainte-Croix (Vaud), the *Association des Gens des Hauts Pays* (Association of Highland Peoples) organizes a musical and gastronomic event in which people in the region can meet those of another mountain community (Aspindza in Georgia in 2003, Bidart and Briscous du Labourd in the French Basque Country in 2005 and the Nepalese region of Jiri in 2007). A similar cultural event occurs

every other summer in Evolène (Valais), where foreign mountain people are invited to present their traditions (dance, crafts, etc.) (Figures 5 to 7). Meetings of inhabitants and schoolchildren have similarly been organized since 2002 between the municipalities of Claro (Ticino) and Valle di Cadore (Italy).

FIGURE 2 A wood panel presenting the international partnerships of Saas-Fee (Wallis). (Photo by Gilles Rudaz.)

Other initiatives add a humanitarian dimension to this type of cultural motivation. The regions of Obersimmental (Bern) and Kotschkor (Kyrgyzstan) work together to maintain mountain agriculture and to promote complementary economic activities (countryside tourism or the sale of Kyrgyz carpets). An association in the Bernese Oberland has set up comparable contacts with the Kalash ethnic group in Pakistan. Since 2000, exchanges have been organized between women farming in Swiss mountains and their counterparts in the Ladakh district of India with a view to exchanging experiences, skills and knowledge in the area of agriculture. Finally, in 2002, thanks to cooperation between people in the Swiss Valais on the one hand and Nepal on the other, attention was drawn to the expertise in irrigation of mountain slopes demonstrated by the inhabitants of the two regions.

FIGURE 3 The Jungfrau and Huangshan web-site banner.[27]

FIGURE 4 Best of the Alps logo.

FIGURES 5 TO 7 'Mountain people' invited to Evolène in August 2007 for an international cultural event. (Photo by Bernard Debarbieux.)

Images of mountains and self-definition of the partners

Even though these 170 partnerships are very different both in form and in orientation, they all involve communities that acknowledge that a mountain attribute or characteristic is part and parcel of a way of being or identity that is shared by the populations in question. The second stage of data analysis has led us to clarify the attributes and characteristics referred to and the identity value attached to them.

One of the most frequently raised motives is the analogy of the conditions of life of the two (or more) communities. According to one of the people running the twinning agreement between La Chaux-de-Fonds (Neuchâtel) and Plav (Montenegro), the partner status attributed by *Causes Communes Suisse* is based on the fact that the two towns are at an altitude of 1000 meters.[28]

More frequent reference is made to the observed or imagined resemblances between the populations themselves. These involve:

- the natural environment: Mountain peoples are sometimes said to share a specific type of relation with the natural environment: 'the mountain region population is strongly influenced by its immediate environment';[29]
- methods of production and ways of life that are presented as analogous: 'Just like farmers in the Alps, the Kalash have an alpine economy and make cheese – except that it's goat's cheese'.[30] 'What we (the two communities of Obersimmental (Bern) and Kotschkor (Kyrgyzstan)) share is that we are equally far from the valley during the summer […]. The difference is thus not so great. They (the Kyrgyzs), like us, go up to the mountain pastures in summer'.[31] The promoters of this partnership justify it by referring to a community of 'problems' and the desire to find answers to the same question: 'how to survive economically in a mountain region?'[32]

- the feeling of oneness between 'mountain people' resulting from such closeness: 'It is true to say that mountain people throughout the world – beyond their cultural, religious or political differences – easily feel at one. From the close ties with their environment, which is often their prime resource, to the community traditions that are deeply rooted thanks to the age-old need of mutual help, via their knowledge of nature, fauna, their love of singing or walking – there is no shortage of common characteristics'.[33] The woman who initiated the partnership between women farming in Swiss mountains and their counterparts in the Ladakh thinks that 'If you are in the mountain [sic] you do almost everything by hand, in Kyrgyzstan, Ladakh or Switzerland you have a lot to say to each other'.[34]
- these shared attributes and the feeling of oneness that comes from the acknowledgement of what brings them together may lead to a shared political project being set up: the Obersimmental-Kotschkor partnership charter stipulates that 'the two mountain regions must constantly draw its [sic] members' attention to the indispensable value of mountain regions'. Thus the Alliance in the Alps network gives its members the 'advantage of making its voice heard in the alpine municipalities within the future Europe of regions'.[35]

Feelings of sameness and otherness

Altogether, these initiatives draw various and sometimes combined conceptions of sameness and otherness.

A recurrent feature of these partnerships lies in the desire to oppose mountain peoples' similarities and the fundamental otherness of peoples of the 'plain' or of the Swiss Plateau: 'Since the mentality of mountain people in Switzerland and anywhere else is relatively close. Since there is a big difference between the mentality of mountain peoples and that of peoples in the plains'.[36] 'A mountain farmer in the Valais canton has more in common with a mountain farmer in Nepal than with someone living on the Swiss Plateau. Even though they are several thousand kilometers apart, mountain peoples have been able to develop similar strategies to make the most out of their difficult milieu.'[37] From this point of view, these partnerships still rely on national imagination which has underlined the value and specificity of mountain regions and the necessity to take them into account in Federal policies.

However, the initiatives differ according to whether they mention – or not – the greater or lesser differences between the municipalities, and whether they praise or claim to reduce the differences.

For some, differences between partner municipalities are minimized or even denied. The insistence on stressing similarities and neglecting or even denying differences is a characteristic of partnerships belonging to the club orientation and working towards an integrating network. For the partner resorts in Best of the Alps, the aim is above all to suggest that they are very close to each other while being different from more modest or less prestigious resorts. As for Alliance in the Alps, its objective of wielding influence as a collective stakeholder in intergovernmental negotiations organized within the Alpine Convention means emphasizing the similarities in member municipalities' projects. Thus these two networks think of themselves as the members' spearhead. Partners in Best of the Alps 'regard themselves as ambassadors for the entire Alpine region'.[38] As for the Swiss municipalities in the Alliance

in the Alps network, they are presented as the spokesperson for all Swiss municipalities in order to call for ratification of the Alpine Convention protocols. Best of the Alps and Alliance in the Alps also tend to stress similarities between member municipalities all the more as they simultaneously tend to maximize differences with the players in the economic or political field with which they compete. '(Members of Best of the Alps) represent the most prestigious winter sports and summer holiday destinations in the Big Five of Europe's Alpine countries. What's more, they are market leaders in the fields of holidays and leisure, with all of them holding out the guarantee of top quality'.[39]

For others, differences between partner municipalities are recognized, but the partnership itself aims to make people aware of them and to work towards reducing them. The partnership thus rests on a common representation of an ideal to reach, and on the idea that the partnership itself can contribute toward this objective.

Best of the Alps and Alliance in the Alps in part also illustrate this conception of the partnership in that over and above the positioning strategy in relation to other external players, they encourage exchanges of experiences and aim to help their members reach their respective objectives – optimizing quality in tourism in the first case and sustainable development practices in the second. Comparable motivation and representation of the sameness-otherness of partners can be seen in partnerships between Alpine ski resorts on the one hand and Chinese, Japanese and American resorts on the other hand. But cooperation between Swiss mountain municipalities and those of Eastern Europe and Asia are an even better illustration of the way of conceiving difference in order to better reduce its manifestations. The promotion of democracy in the East and economic development, well-being and improvement in the condition of women in the South are explicitly conceived of as a means of bringing the populations of partner communities closer to living conditions in Switzerland. In this quest for increased similarity, people often speak of more or less stereotyped images of mountains which partners adopt for the occasion, as if to better stress mountain peoples' community of being and the necessity of bringing them closer together. Thus partnerships with municipalities in Eastern Europe frequently call on one of the most famous mountain stereotypes: the mountain dweller who is free. This figure, which is central in Swiss national mythology,[40] was particularly useful for the promotion of democracy and decentralization in the Balkans: '*Democracy originally started in mountain valleys where independent inhabitants worked together on small projects: build[ing] houses and stables, roads, bridges and cattle trails, schools and churches. Mountain development today – on the community level – is actually not much different: groups of people get organized locally and democratically to identify, start and realize projects in different sectors, like education, basic health and rescue, mountain agriculture, cattle-breeding, energy procurement or tourism*'.[41] The Bulgarian region of Stara Planina is presented by one of the program initiators as 'the region of the Bulgarian revolutionaries'.[42] The figure of William Tell is symbolic of this political stereotype and is sometimes referred to in such terms: 'it is the mountain people who defended themselves against the people of the plain'.[43]

For others, differences between partners, far from being denied or reduced, are praised. This is the case for partnerships seeking to highlight the diversity of mountain cultures, like those sought out by Sainte-Croix. Events organized by the Association des Gens des Hauts Pays are conceived of as an 'opportunity to discover other mountain traditions'.[44] Similar praising of differences can be found in examples of decentralized cooperation, but here too they emphasize

cultural traits, whereas economic differences are intended to be reduced. Thus the motto of the Obersimmental-Kotschkor partnership was 'Two worlds – two partners – one objective'. It can also be found in the examples of partnerships between Swiss and Asian or American ski resorts, over and above a genuine concern for commercial complementarity.

The role of distance in the representation of sameness/otherness

It ensues from the preceding points that the variety in types of partnerships and the variety of motivations and justifications surrounding them can be linked to the representations of distance and the geographical scales and levels in which these partnerships take root.

With clubs (ski resorts) and networks (municipalities promoting a mode of sustainable development), the relative geographical proximity of the municipalities and resorts in question, all of which are in the Alps, facilitates the stress put on similarities and the running of a common project in the face of players which are also in the Alps and in relation to which it is necessary to position oneself – less prestigious stations for Best of the Alps, partner States in the Alpine Convention and promoters of other development models for Alliance in the Alps.

Regarding cooperation at the European level and in the framework of North-South relations, geographical distance is seen as a guarantee of a cultural differential with added value. But similarity in mountain living conditions, such as is imagined outside any reference to geographical distance, makes an exchange of experiences possible.

And for partnerships who praise the difference between partners, the geographical distance between partners is thought of as the guarantee of cultural otherness that the partners wish to celebrate – Sainte-Croix' and Evolène's partners have to date all been chosen in mountain massifs other than the Jura and the Alps.

The role of Swiss national identity in the representation of sameness

Along with the various modes of conceiving sameness and otherness between partners, the partnerships refer more or less to complementary identification at the higher and lower levels.

At the higher level, the role of players capable of putting forward or implementing policies motivated by national considerations has been stressed several times. The cooperation with Eastern Europe's mountain regions may be controlled by associations, but it is part of Switzerland's position in the restoring of balance in Europe after the fall of communism. Thus Switzerland supported the 'Development of seven national mountain organizations from South and East of the Adriatic sea' program, out of which arose the Balkandesk, i.e. a branch for the Eastern countries within Euromontana, the European Association for Mountain Areas.[45]

The role played by the SDC in promoting and supporting decentralized cooperation projects is another illustration of the quest for complementarities between the initiatives and objectives of players at the federal level and players at the local level. The SDC supported partnerships between Swiss mountain communities and mountain communities from other parts of the world, like the Bulgarian Stara Planina, the Kalash Valley in Northern Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Ladakh and Bhutan.

Finally, it was noted above that the cooperation set up between Swiss ski resorts and American and Asian resorts drew more – from the point of view of the latter two – on the Swiss partners' fame and Switzerland's mountain image. For the initiator of the Aspen-Davos twinning, to be associated with a major mountain center such as Davos is an opportunity for Aspen to 'bring back the mountain to Aspen'.[46] For a person in charge of the ski-lifts, the partnership 'reinforces the mountain image of Aspen'.[47] Finally, the director of the Zermatt Tourist Office spoke thus on his return from China: 'The Chinese tourist offices are proud of this twinning: lo and behold, the tourist region of Zermatt and the Valais have risen to the same level as the Yunnan province!'[48] But Switzerland has also gained some partnerships with exceptional countries with strong commercial potential in which to promote its tourism. Thus when Grindelwald joined up with Azumi Mura, it demonstrated that 'sending a signal (to Japanese clientele) is important'.[49] Thanks to the partnership between the Matterhorn and Yulong Snow Mountain, a pavilion to promote tourism in Switzerland was set up at the foot of the Chinese mountain, the 'Swiss Matterhorn Dreamland', whose vocation is to promote Switzerland to Chinese clientele. At the same time, Switzerland Tourism, the national organization for the promotion of tourism, chose the following slogan for its campaigns abroad: 'Treat yourself to the original: Switzerland'.

In other words, several of the partnerships studied here may be run by local players, but correspond to the aims pursued by federal players: the latter sometimes seek to promote a certain image of mountainous Switzerland at the international level and sometimes use the fondness that Swiss people feel for their mountains to optimize the operations that they had themselves initiated (as in the case of Inter-Assist).

The strategic interlocking of national and local initiatives, often playing on the attachment to the mountain as an identity factor, can thus be seen in a large number of partnerships. It is overwhelmingly justified by the images and expressions of identity which are particularly dear to the Swiss: 'it's logical that we Swiss look after the population in the mountains'.[50] 'And for us, the Swiss, it's obvious, the mountains are our national identity, the Alps. It's a side of Switzerland'.[51]

And beyond, local and regional issues

It would, however, be wrong to conclude that most of the partnerships studied here exploit identities that are completely subordinated in one way or another to the expression of Swiss national identity or Switzerland's international image. Some of them use the construction of identity on other scales.

The alpine scale comes first and foremost, therefore, for the clubs and networks of players. It has already been said that Alliance in the Alps and Best of the Alps – albeit in very different ways and with almost opposite objectives – work towards producing and spreading an image of the Alps that takes little notice of specifically national characteristics. Admittedly, Alliance in the Alps has a national structure, and the large Swiss ski resorts have close links with Switzerland Tourism. But for both, the reference to Switzerland is basically seen as a guarantee of efficiency, nothing more.

The local level comes next. The extent to which each of the partnerships is given local prominence is very changeable, but all of them aim to produce effects on the local society

taken as a whole. For the most technical and the most political partnerships – such as the networks and clubs mentioned above – the involvement of the local population at first seems to be a secondary objective. This could be seen when the first study was done in order to take an inventory of partnerships: in most cases the person contacted in the town hall did not know that the municipality was in the Alliance in the Alps network. Involvement in the network is the business of elected officials or technical personnel for both the Alliance and Best of the Alps. Conversely, the expected effects are directed at the local population or local economy as a whole since in one case what is aimed at is that a shared vision of sustainable development be adopted by the greatest number of people, and in the other case there is the objective of excellence in tourism. On the other hand, for other partnerships organizing school exchanges, cultural events and exchanges of know-how, the population is more directly involved. In some cases it is even the main element: the objective of the people running the *Association des Gens des Hauts-Pays* is – over and above opening out to the populations of different mountains – intended to 'federate the strengths of the various associations that are active in the Jura Platform' and to involve the residents in the municipality of Sainte-Croix in a collective project that is designed to turn around the image of the municipality which has been altered by the industrial crisis. In Evolène, the Festival organized in partnership with invited mountain people from abroad provides a space for celebrating local craftwork and heritage. Interviews conducted in Claro clearly showed the desire to develop the inhabitants' attachment to their place of residence. For the municipality's deputy mayor, setting up a partnership helps create a 'possibility of a meeting' between the municipality's oldest and most recent inhabitants. Zermatt and Sexten identify this aspect as an operational objective in their inaugural undertaking: '*Cultural identity is the necessary condition for cohesion and commitment towards mountain regions as areas for living and economic areas*'. In other words, the opening up of Switzerland's mountain municipalities to the wider world is also seen as a way of forging social links at the local level. As notes the woman who instigated the partnership between Swiss women farmers and Ladakhi women, this type of operation enables each of the groups in question to develop 'a better feeling of one's own value'.[52]

Conclusion

This article has sought to analyze the partnerships set up by Swiss mountain communities with foreign mountain communities. It has focused on them as indicators of the changes in the ways of calling on collective identities through concrete projects in the context of globalization and of questioning the capacity of Nation-States to regulate national identities.

It has shown the large number of partnerships built upon the praising of attributes and values associated with mountains. But it has also shown the very great variety in the types of partnership and their objectives, and the very great diversity in the ways of using images of mountains and of referring to mountain identities. Some partnerships favor economic promotion, others seek to further humanitarian projects, others look to build political lobbies, while yet others concentrate on pretexts for celebrating mountain cultures – and there is often a mix of these very different motivations. There is also great diversity in the images of mountains that are exploited and diversity in the development models they use – sustainable development, praising the quality of life, promoting tourism at the international level, etc.

But the main objective of this article was to go further, and to evaluate whether these partnerships and the collective mountain identities they rely on reinforce or weaken national identities. One might indeed have imagined that, given the general context in which transnational initiatives are taking off and the more particular context of mobilization around mountain issues since the Rio Earth Summit, there would be a multiplication of initiatives by the Alpine and Jura communities aiming to help them interact independently from national frameworks (institutional as well as ideological). However, it appears that most local projects did rely on these frameworks. Most of the projects implemented by communities are willing to combine a large array of scales and objectives: national policies, federal strategies on the international scene, players' aims concerning local projects, and local administrations' desire to improve social bonds within their community. This combination seems motivated by two kinds of considerations: a pragmatic one, with stakeholders at various scales being able to take advantage of the same initiatives; and an ideological one, with the promotion of mountain images being able to celebrate local, regional and national identities at the same time.

Consequently, the Swiss mountain communities' modest contribution to the globalization of political and cultural exchanges is a paradoxical illustration of contemporary trends as analyzed by Manuel Castells and Arjun Appadurai. For if one uses the vocabulary and ideas of the former, one sees that the 'project identities' as expressed and exploited within these partnerships are never at odds with the 'legitimizing identities' on which the Swiss State and nation rest. Quite to the contrary, they are complementary. Moreover, the situation under investigation here shows that the globalization of flows – here, in relation to peoples and images of mountains – is not part of a weakening of the symbolic system underpinning the Nation-State, which is a scenario that has been strongly theorized and abundantly illustrated by Appadurai. On the contrary, the transnationalization of exchanges between mountain communities appears more as a utilization of the Swiss imaginative universe that previously was the foundation of national and regional identity and today is exploited at the global level in the form of semantic and symbolic redundancy.

Acknowledgements

This article has been written on the basis of research work entitled 'Swiss mountain communities in a global network: local/global consequences of the international rise of mountain issues' and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. We would like to thank the Swiss Federal Office of Agriculture, the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics, the Association Suisse pour le Conseil des Communes et Régions d'Europe for the information provided. We are most grateful to the mountain municipalities, local associations and interviewed stakeholders who participated in this research far beyond our expectations, and to the Aspen Sister Cities Committee (USA) for its warm and outstanding welcome. We also thank the referees of this journal for their very valuable advice, as well as Denis Cosgrove who was some years ago a very valuable partner for initiating the authors to English-speaking cultural geography.

Biographical notes

Bernard Debarbieux is a professor at the University of Geneva. His research focuses on representations of mountains, social identities and public policies related to mountains, and more generally

on theories of place, landscape and territoriality. He can be contacted at: Department of Geography, University of Geneva, Bd. du Pont-d'Arve 40, UNIMAIL, 1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland; email: Bernard.Debarbieux@geo.unige.ch

Gilles Rudaz is a postdoctoral scholar in the Environmental Policy and Planning Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His research focuses on mountain communities and policies. He can be contacted at: Environmental Policy and Planning Group, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, # 9–316, Cambridge, MA 02139–4307, USA; email: rudaz@mit.edu

Notes

1 A.D. Smith, 'When is a nation?', *Geopolitics* 7 (2002), pp. 5–32; J. Gottmann, *La politique des Etats et leur géographie* (Paris, Colin, 1952).

2 E.J. Hobsbawn, *Nations and nationalism since 1780: programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990); E. Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983).

3 S. Schama, *Landscape and memory* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); F. Walter, *Les figures paysagères de la nation* (Paris, EHESS, 2004); A. Paasi, 'Geographical perspectives on Finnish national identity', *Geojournal* 43 (1997), pp. 41–50.

4 U. Hannerz, *Transnational connections: culture, people, places* (London, Routledge, 1996); L.G. Basch, N.G. Schiller and C.S. Szanton-Blanc, *Nations unbound: transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments and deterritorialized nation-states* (Langhorne, Gordon and Breach, 1994); A. Tarrius, *Mobilités, identités, territoires: les nouveaux cosmopolitismes* (La Tour d'Aigues, Editions de l'Aube, 2000); A. Appadurai, *Modernity at large, cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

5 M. Castells, *The power of identity* (London, Blackwell, 1997).

6 A. Micoud, 'Des patrimoines aux territoires durables. Ethnologie et écologie dans les campagnes françaises', *Ethnologie Française* 34 (2004), pp. 13–22.

7 D. Cosgrove, *Apollo's eye: a cartographic genealogy of the Earth in the western imagination* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); E. Morin, *Seven complex lessons in education* (Paris, Editions de l'UNESCO, 2001).

8 Castells, *The power of identity*.

9 F. Dubet, *Le déclin de l'institution* (Paris, Seuil, 2002).

10 Castells, *The power of identity*.

11 P. Jackson, P. Crang and C. Dwyer, *Transnational spaces* (London, Routledge, 2004); B. Jouve and Y. Roche, *Des flux et des terroirs: vers un monde sans Etats?* (Montreal, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2006).

12 J. Dickinson and A.J. Bailey, '(Re)membering diaspora: uneven geographies of Indian dual citizenship', *Political geography* 26 (2007), pp. 757–74.

13 W. Zelinsky, 'The twinning of the world: sister cities in geographic and historical perspective', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 1 (1991), pp. 1–31.

14 Among the institutions which initiated and sometimes coordinated such partnerships, one can mention the Council of European Municipalities created in 1951; People to People in 1956; the World Federation of United and Twinned Towns in 1957; Cities for Climate Protection in 1993; Soil and Land Alliance of European Cities and Municipalities in 2000; and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives in 1990. For historical analysis of some of these initiatives, see P. Dogliani, 'European municipalism in the first half of the twentieth century: the socialist network', *Contemporary European history* 4 (2002), pp. 573–96; O. Gaspari, 'Cities against states? Hopes, dreams and shortcomings of the European municipal movement 1900–1960', *Contemporary European history* 4 (2002), pp. 597–621; C. Chombard-Gaudin, 'Pour une histoire des villes et communes jumelées', *Vingtième siècle, revue d'histoire* 35 (1992), pp. 60–6.

15 B. Poche and J.-P. Zuanon, 'Les collectivités de montagne: image externe et représentations propres', in *Actes du XIe colloque franco-italien d'études alpines: spécificité du milieu alpin?* (Grenoble, CRHIPA, 1986), pp. 5–22. B. Debarbieux, 'Figures du montagnard: invention savante et instrumentalisation d'un type humain', *Annales de géographie* 660 (2008), pp. 90–115.

16 B. Debarbieux and M. Price, 'Representing mountains: from local and national to global common good', *Geopolitics* 1 (2008), pp. 148–68.

17 D. Snow, *Collective identities and expressive forms* (Irvine, Center for the Study of Democracy, 2001), p. 3.

18 F. Walter, *Les figures paysagères de la nation*.

19 O. Zimmer, 'In search of natural identity: Alpine landscape and the reconstruction of the Swiss nation', *Comparative studies in society and history* 40 (1998), pp. 637–65.

20 Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, *Mountains and people: an account of mountain development programmes supported by the SDC* (Bern, 2002).

21 The 1453 Swiss municipalities were identified on the basis of the political and administrative definition of the mountain in Switzerland, as set out in two legal texts: the Law of 21 March 1997 (Federal Law on Investment Aid in Mountain Regions) and the Ordinance of 7 December 1997 (Ordinance on the Agricultural Production Register and Zone Limits). The former identifies mountain municipalities; the latter, land for agricultural use.

22 Swiss Association for the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Alliance in the Alps and the SDC.

23 For non-Swiss communities, the '*mountain*' characteristic has been mainly determined using statistical criteria. For the EU, a European Commission study was used (NORDREGIO, 2004) that gives a definition of mountains for the Union. For municipalities outside the EU, the mountain characteristic was determined using topography, with informal use of UNEP criteria defining mountain regions worldwide (Kapos 2000), which are themselves similar to those adopted by the Nordregio study. Nordregio, *Mountain Areas in Europe: Analysis of mountain areas in EU member states, acceding and other European countries* (Brussels, Directorate General for Regional Policy, European Commission, 2004).

24 Since 2005, other networks of this kind have been created at the alpine scale: between communities willing to promote sustainable tourism (*Pearls of the Alps*), between enterprises eager to develop passive architecture (*NENA*), etc.

25 The treaty was signed by 8 Alpine States (Germany, France, Italy, Liechtenstein, Austria, Switzerland, then Slovenia and Monaco) and the European Union in 1991. It was initiated by environmental organizations and officially aims to pursue 'a comprehensive policy for the preservation and protection of the Alps after careful consideration of the interests of all the Alpine States, their Alpine regions and the European Economic Community, and through the prudent and sustained use of resources' (Convention on the Protection of the Alps, article 2).

26 Proclamation by the Aspen City Council of a Davos Day, 27 June 2005.

27 Available at: http://www.sistermountains.com

28 V. Kernen, 'La Chaux-de-Fonds veille sur sa filleule, la commune de Plav', *Le Courrier*, 20 December 2003.

29 Zermatt-Sexten partnership statement.

30 This was said by the partnership initiator and quoted in S. Hunziker, 'Zwei Bergkulturen, eine Idee', *Berner Zeitung*, 1 June 2002, p. 27.

31 Interview 20.

32 Interview 21.1.

33 Association des Gens des Hauts Pays, Brochure (Sainte-Croix, 2003).

34 Interview 38.

35 Alliance in the Alps, 1997–2002 Report (Mäder, 2002), p. 6.

[36] Interview 34.1.
[37] F. Brugger, L'eau crée des liens Valais-Népal (Helvetas, 2002).
[38] Best of the Alps, Brochure (Grindelwald).
[39] Best of the Alps, Brochure (Grindelwald).
[40] C. Reichler and R. Ruffieux, 'Le voyage en Suisse. Anthologie des voyageurs français et européens de la Renaissance au XXe siècle' (Paris, Robert Laffont, 1998).
[41] Available at: http://www.inter-assist.ch.
[42] Interview 34.1.
[43] Interview 34.1.
[44] Association des Gens des Hauts Pays, Brochure (Sainte-Croix, 2003).
[45] Euromontana, Report November 2002 – February 2003 (Brussels, 2003), p. 10.
[46] Interview 5.3.
[47] Interview 4.2.
[48] Interview 36.
[49] Interview 18.
[50] Interview 34.
[51] Interview 38.
[52] Maria Roselli, 'Willisau-Ladakh, la filière de la fraise', *Un seul monde* 1 (Bern, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2004), pp. 14–15.